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SUBJECT: DOES THE ROMA PLENIPOTENTIARY HELP OR HURT THE ROMA?

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BRATISLAVA 00000363 001.2 OF 002

¶1. Summary: According to some Roma activists, the government's Roma Plenipotentiary is the only government post in Slovakia that pays attention to the Roma issue. However, many of them believe that since the post's competencies have been reduced and diluted over time, it is now mostly a figurehead and should not be refilled. The last Plenipotentiary, Anina Botosova, resigned in June 2009 (reftel), and the office has remained vacant since then. Deputy Prime Minister Caplovic has said that he will appoint a new Plenipotentiary in mid-August, and recent public debate has focused on whether a Plenipotentiary actually furthers the advancement and integration of the Roma, or merely provides a scapegoat for the government's failing performance. End Summary.

¶2. After Caplovic's assumption of the duties of DPM for Human Rights, National Minorities, and a Knowledge-Based Society in 2006, he recalled then-Plenipotentiary Klara Orgovanova allegedly for her pro-Dzurinda policies and lack of loyalty to the new government. She was replaced in 2007 by Anina Botosova, a former Ministry of Labor employee and daughter of well-respected Roma musician Berky Mrenica. Several NGO leaders speculated that Botosova was too weak to manage such an office and control the approximately 200 million Euros in EU structural funds that were earmarked by the GOS for the "horizontal priority" of Roma community development. Approximately one year into Botosova's term, Caplovic changed the status of her post, and appointed two new directors. One of these oversees the coordination of the EU money with the relevant GOS Ministries, and the other manages the Plenipotentiary's office. Botosova resigned in June 2009 due to Caplovic's pressure and her realization that her position had become a formal one deprived of any real competencies.

¶3. Recently, DPM Caplovic stated that he wanted to find a "strong man" to be his new Roma Plenipotentiary. Media and NGOs currently speculate that Tibor Loran, the only ethnic Roma university professor in Slovakia, may be appointed to the post. Several Roma organizations have protested against his nomination, claiming that he already failed in other posts dealing with Roma (for example, as the city manager of Lunik IX, the infamous Roma block of apartments in Kosice.) Among the most outspoken Loran critics are the Roma Initiative of Slovakia (RIS) Chairman, Alexander Patkolo, and Ladislav Richter, both of whom are seen to be governing party Smer loyalists.

¶4. In a survey conducted by the Roma-focused newspaper, Romano lil Nevo, Roma leaders and activists were asked whether they support preserving the Plenipotentiary post or would prefer to abolish it. The majority of them opined that the post should be abolished unless the government supplies the office with more competencies, funds, and decision-making authority. Of the fourteen Roma leaders interviewed, eight believe that the post

of Plenipotentiary in its current status should be closed and that some of its competencies should be moved to Caplovic's office. Anna Koptova, the director of the Romani Gymnazium (high school) in Kosice and former deputy to the Federal Czechoslovak Parliament, said that "a plenipotentiary without any money and competencies is only a figure on a chess board." Former Plenipotentiary from 2001-2007, Klara Orgovanova, said the office in its current form should be discontinued and that "the state administration bodies and those of the local government should follow up the already-implemented policies in a more systematic and consistent way."

15. On August 13, Orgovanova told us that she thinks Caplovic is playing a game and that she does not expect Loran to be the next plenipotentiary. In her view, Caplovic is waiting to hear more names from Roma leaders and appoint the one who would be the most loyal and least confrontational. While Caplovic has publicly stated he will appoint a new Plenipotentiary in September at the latest (though the press speculates it might be this week), some of our Roma contacts believe that Caplovic is stalling in the hope that more Roma leaders will request to close the office, which he would prefer to do. Such a move would place EU funds and the employees managing them under his direct control.

16. Comment: We understand why many activists believe the Plenipotentiary post should be abolished. The post is saddled with the responsibility of being the only national-level political representative of the incredibly fractious Roma community, yet it has very limited authority to implement projects to improve the Roma community's situation and has to serve as a yes-man to Caplovic. While Botosova was at the helm, the only accomplishments we observed were the standardization of the Romani language and the opening of the National Museum of Roma Culture. Both have some long-term cultural value but neither advances the day-to-day conditions of the Roma community. Moreover, none of the "horizontal priority" EU structural funds for 2007-2013 were allocated or spent on

BRATISLAVA 00000363 002.2 OF 002

education, housing, health, or employment by the office and relevant ministries, and now there is growing public sentiment amongst the Slovak majority population to prevent the earmarking of these EU funds in response to the perceived increase in Roma criminality in Slovakia. However, if the GOS were to abolish the post, Caplovic himself would be under more intense public scrutiny and would have to shoulder the blame for what many view as a deteriorating Roma situation in Slovakia. Instead, we anticipate Caplovic will find a relatively benign figurehead who will maintain the appearance of moving forward, but only within the parameters which the government allows. End comment.  
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